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### Becoming a Qualitative Researcher

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# Becoming a Qualitative Researcher: A Narrative Account of Conducting My First Qualitative Study Involving In-depth Life History Interviews

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Despite a wide range of literature on research methodology, first time researchers encounter practical and methodological challenges. This paper provides insights to first time researchers interested in qualitative research. The paper discusses how as a first time qualitative researcher I managed to work within a challenging context to explore livelihoods situation of low-income young women in urban Botswana. Data collection was based on a combination of methods involving in-depth life history interviews, standardized open ended questionnaires, observations, photo elicitation, and a variety of documents. Data analysis and reporting of the findings were based on thematic narrative approach. Although the study did not give priority to any of the methods used, in-depth life history interviews were both challenging and informative to me as a first time qualitative researcher. Conducting a qualitative study that involved life history interviews with young women in my own community was a delicate process which required me to be both flexible and reflexive.

**Key words:** gender, in-depth life history interviews, new researchers, qualitative research, Botswana.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper summarizes the methodological approach of a doctoral thesis which sought to understand youth livelihoods in Botswana from the perspective of youth as social agents. I conceptualized the study from gender and intergenerational perspectives with a focus on low-income young women engaged in street vending in Gaborone city. The aim was to understand how these young women define and respond to situation of their livelihoods. The study was also designed to explore popular narratives informing official development interventions geared towards the empowerment of youth and women in Botswana.

Data collection was based on different methods involving in-depth life-history interviews, standardized open-ended questionnaires, observation, and some documents. Although the study did not give priority to any of the methods used, this paper largely draws from my experience of applying in-depth life history interviews. The paper begins by summarizing the general aim and

conceptualization of the study. It moves on to discuss how I negotiated access to collect life history data from my female research participants and how I dealt with complex ethical and methodological dilemmas encountered. The paper also briefly reflects on my experience of using other data collection methods. The last section looks at how I approached data analysis and presentation of the findings. After going through this narrative paper, first time researchers are expected to have developed interest and confidence in conducting a qualitative study, be able to deal with the challenges they may encounter in their own research and also appreciate the importance of being flexible and reflexive in qualitative research.

## Background

The doctoral study from which this paper is drawn was situated within recent global call to empower young people in developing countries in their present and future

lives as adults. In general terms, the youth are rarely viewed as “a resource” but instead are portrayed as “victims of poverty” and “problems in society” [1]. Similar to most countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Botswana has a youthful population. Youth, defined by the Botswana National Youth Policy of 1996 as a young male and young female person aged from 12 to 29 years constituted 43.6% of the total 1.68 million people in the country as reported in the national population and housing census of 2001.

The Government of Botswana continues to introduce a wide range of targeted development interventions to empower its youthful population. The study appreciated young women as a disadvantaged youth category, which requires special attention in order to empower them as outlined in the Botswana National Youth Policy of 1996. However, recent literature on youth in Botswana draws attention to inadequate linkages that appear to be made between interventions on youth livelihoods and socio-cultural contexts within which young people in general and young women in particular live in.

The study took as its starting point the argument that merely introducing development interventions is less likely to change underlying structural factors that appear to be constraining young people in developing countries from having decent livelihoods. The broader conceptualization of the study was situated within the literature on youth, gender, empowerment, power, structure and agency. It was based on the premise that empowerment should be a bottom-up process driven by an understanding of how young people themselves view and respond to their own livelihoods [2]. The main argument was that the ‘youth’ in general and young women in particular are not passive victims but are active social agents who re-shape their own livelihood situations. The study focused on young women engaged in urban street vending based on epistemological grounds and on observable reality of the context. I drew insights from my experience as a young man who once engaged in street vending and from my previous research on this sector from an urban planning perspective [3]. The focus was also based on the fact that participation of young people in street vending in Botswana like in other developing countries is growing at a rapid rate. Young women participate in this informal sector at rates disproportionately high to those of young men. The study moved beyond popular discourses which regard street vending as either a consequence of economic failure by the state to provide adequate employment in the formal sector or as a mere survivalist and/or livelihood diversification strategy by the poor. I conceptualized it from a social constructionist and life-course perspectives as a significant life experience or episode of those people who are or have once engaged in it. I viewed engagement in street vending as a point in time in which youth (young women) can look back at their experiences and towards their future as adults.

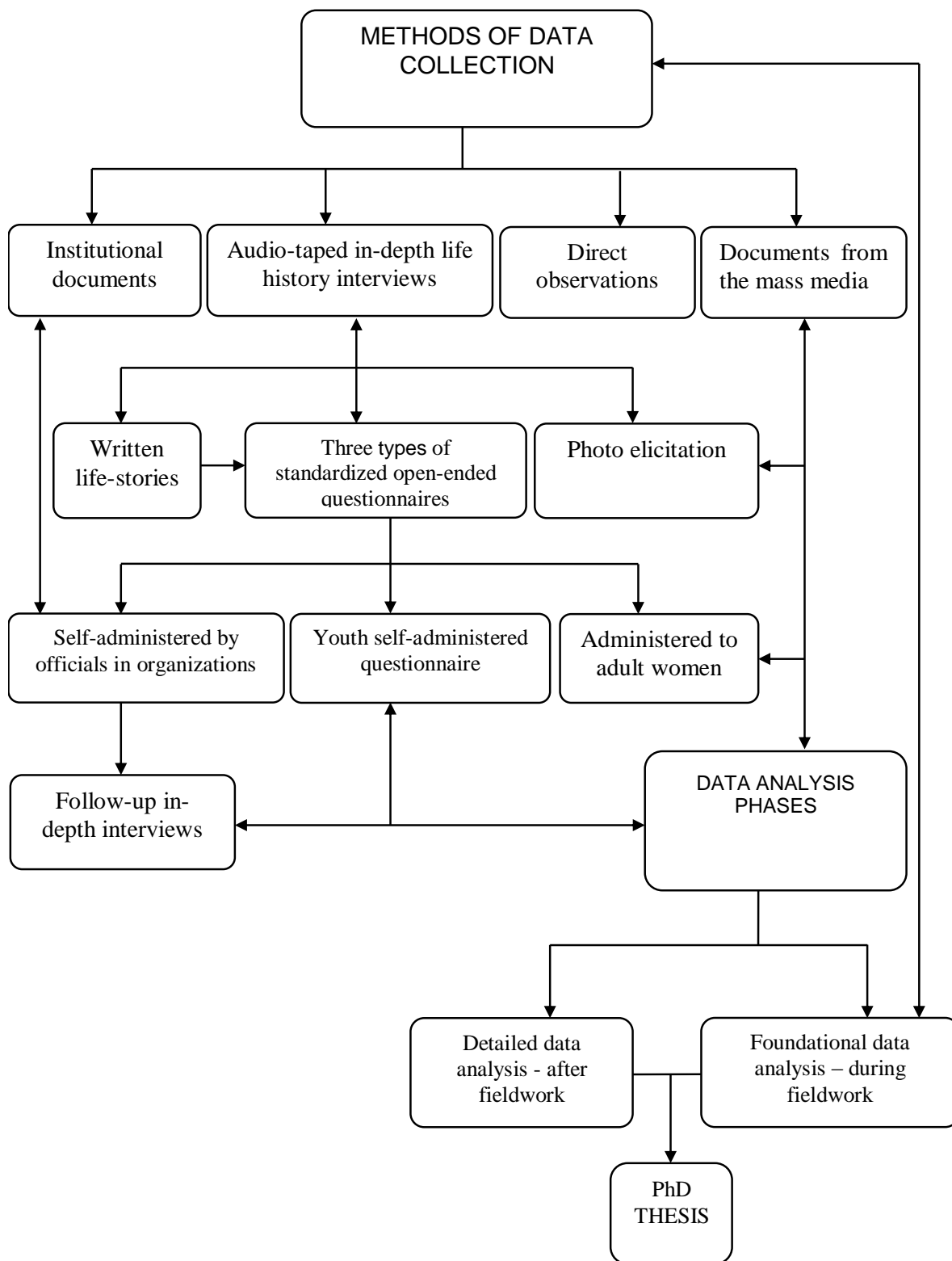
This conceptualization is an original innovative academic context from which my doctoral thesis was written, and thus the same perspective from which to ‘read the text’ in it. As an episode not just a strategy, street vending constitutes a relatively small portion of a complex socio-cultural context within which youth livelihoods are embedded, and as such, it was just an entry point in understanding the complexity of such contexts. It emerged from the study that livelihoods of individual participants are not enacted in a linear fashion but are dynamic and they intersect with diverse socially constructed contexts. A detailed paper on how I conceptualized and designed the study was published in peer-reviewed proceedings of an international conference on research methodology [see 4]. The paper provides other researchers with ideas on how to conceptualize and design an original innovative academic study, which is firmly rooted within their philosophical and methodological perspectives.

## Research Design and Data Collection

In line with the conceptualization, I adopted a qualitative case-study research design. Although the main focus was on young women engaged in street vending, the study embraced the flexibility and emergent principles of qualitative research design. It took into account lived experiences and points of view of other significant research participants. The selection of participants was based on a diagrammatic model, which I developed to guide the study beyond mere engagement of young women in street vending. The model guided the study to explore the participants’ livelihoods within their real life contexts. The model is an original contribution of my doctoral study to knowledge in its own right [4]. As illustrated in Figure 1, data collection was based on a combination of methods. These methods were not discrete stages of data collection but I applied them concurrently.

## In-Depth Life History Interviews

The study required holistic data that would give an understanding of the process in which the participants engage in and meanings they attach to their significant life experiences. Securing life history data through in-depth interviews become an important method to use. Conducting in-depth interviews using a flexible guide allowed me to secure data on diverse lived experiences and points of view the participants hold within their socio-cultural contexts and to understand how those experiences impact on their livelihoods. Although I considered the use of in-depth life history interviews to be necessary, I faced challenges during fieldwork to decide on the actual number of interviews required. Baker and Edwards [5] compiled an excellent paper on the question ‘how many qualitative interviews is enough?’ from the



**Figure 1.** Methods of data collection and analysis.  
**Source:** Author's own construct.

experiences of early career researchers and established academics and their general answer is 'it depends'. In

considering what 'it depends upon' however, the responses offer guidance on the epistemological,



**Figure 2.** A typical street vending enterprise in Gaborone.  
**Source:** Author's fieldwork in Gaborone, Botswana.

methodological and practical issues to take into account when conducting research projects [5].

In this study, there are total of 23 life histories gathered from three categories of key research participants, consisting of 17 young women, 2 young men, and 4 adult women. Gaining access to all the research participants was through interviews at street vending locations. However, negotiating for such access was a complex and delicate process due mainly to tense conditions under which street vendors are operating. In some instances, negotiating with young women was done after gaining verbal consent of the gate-keepers, namely, their employers who were not always 'visible' on the streets. With the exception of only 2 interviews which were held at the research participants' places of residence, the rest were held whilst the research participants were busy undertaking their daily street vending activities (see Figure 2). The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 3 hours and all of them were audiotaped. The length of each interview was largely determined by the frequency at which the audiotape recorder was switched on and off to allow the narrator to attend to her/his customers or to try and minimize disturbance from heavy flowing traffic or from loud music playing nearby. The length was also dependent on the participants' willingness to elaborate

their life stories which varied between individuals (one adult woman used two 60 minutes cassettes).

Even though qualitative researchers do not count and are not worried so much with the sample size [6], two challenges are worthy of mentioning. Considering that I conceptualized the study from gender and intergenerational perspectives, a much higher sample size of young men could have given better insights. Unfortunately, not only were young men engaged in street vending found to be few in number as compared to their female counterparts but most of them were engaged in migratory vending, and those stationed were mainly selling cassettes and playing music. Second and most importantly, I experienced challenges of gaining access to interview young women (elaborated in the following sections). In the whole process of conducting this study, I had no other potential sources of funding apart from relying entirely on my generous Commonwealth Scholarship. Due to time and financial constraints I could only do fieldwork for a maximum period of six months. I had to train two close female friends of mine to assist me with conducting these interviews. I trusted them to conduct the interviews without compromising methodological rigour. They are both university degree holders and activists in a leading women's NGO in the country.

### The Value of Female Research Assistants

I sought assistance from my female friends not with the aim to secure a representative sample of young women to make statistical generalizations because in qualitative research this is not a viable way in making claims for empirical validity [7]. On the contrary, the aim was to identify cases with rich life history data that will address the main purpose of my study. Similar to Peck and Secker [8 p555] who report that they “deliberately employed ‘insider’ researchers who shared participants’ background to short circuit the research process”, I sought assistance from these two female friends of mine by their virtue of being ‘insiders in the world of young women’. I was born and raised in Botswana and thus I assumed that my engagement with young women makes them to regard me as an ‘outsider in their world’ or as their ‘brother’. It is unusual in traditional Tswana culture for a ‘sister’ and a ‘brother’ to share life experiences as this is regarded to weaken the respect the two are inclined to each other. Apart from culturally sanctioned gender relations, my age as a young man also made most young women to be suspicious about the actual motives of my research. This particular fieldwork experience made me to appreciate complex challenges of conducting research in one’s own community or backyard [9].

Gender (sex) and generation (age) influence the way the researcher interacts with the researched and should be considered at every stage of the research process. This is well emphasized in the literature on in-depth life history interviews with women. Kakuru and Paradza [10 pp295-6] conclude that “life history research by women about women provides additional empowerment for women research participants in societies where such informants would not be very comfortable talking to male researchers, or where this is forbidden”. My two research assistants informed me that some of the young women they interviewed requested for advice from them on important women issues and demanded that this should not be recorded as part of their life stories. However, the transcripts of the few interviews my research assistants conducted provided richer life history data as compared to the ones which I personally conducted. As will be seen later, researchers who intend to use in-depth life history interviews should understand the impact of the interview on the participants themselves. The two research assistants were valuable in my study to comply with local expectations, which I was familiar with as an ‘insider’ and also to remain an ‘outsider’ because “it helps if the researcher makes the familiar strange by not taking things for granted” [11 p3].

### Authenticity and Accountability in Research

An interesting fieldwork experience contradictory to the one discussed above relates to the ‘distance’ the

researcher should maintain between himself/herself and the researched. Davies and Dodd [7 p283] emphasize that “qualitative research does not, in general, measure or attempt to quantify the research data gathered (but) distance between researcher and participants can indeed be a barrier to research”. Being a first time qualitative researcher, I initially misunderstood what negotiating rapport means and I befriended potential research participants. Though not disputing the potential benefits in qualitative research, becoming a ‘friend’ unintentionally closed the distance between my life as a researcher ‘an outsider’ and life experiences I wanted to understand as genuinely told by young women ‘insiders’. Trustworthiness is the preferred term as evidence of authenticity and accountability in qualitative research than validity and reliability associated with quantitative research [12-15]. Although researchers are responsible for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research through many ways, it is essential to understand the ‘trust’ the researched may have on the researcher before they volunteer to participate in his/her study. From my fieldwork experience, the researched do not just trust what a particular researcher is openly and honestly informing them about his/her research. Rather, they make decisions on the basis of knowledge or wisdom gained from having participated in previous research.

I was surprised to learn from some potential research participants that prior to my field visit there was a certain male researcher (of my age) who ‘took advantage’ of their desperate street vending conditions and lured them to participate in his study. The alleged researcher promised to reward them with cooler boxes to store their perishables. They wanted to receive the cooler boxes first before they could participate in my study. Interestingly, I was later informed that there is a company selling beverages which on time to time conduct market research and then reward their research participants (including street vendors) with a variety of products which include amongst others cooler boxes tagged with their trademark. The literature interrogates rewarding research participants from different angles but there are two contradictory perspectives to the whole issue. On the one end, which I termed the ‘ethical values perspective’, it is argued that people have moral and ethical rights to benefit from research they participate in both for their time and efforts in providing data. On the other hand, which I termed the ‘quest for quality perspective’, it is assumed that ‘rewarding’ research participants is likely to compromise the quality of the research. Material rewards make participants to impress the researcher by providing flawed data.

Most of the participants asked these two difficult but crucial questions to answer: What are you going to give me in return? How will I benefit from your research? Some even suspected that I am using them freely whilst I get rewarded for conducting the study. In answering from the ‘quest for quality perspective’, I openly and honestly



informed them that participation in the study is purely voluntary with no material reward of any kind. From an 'ethical values perspective', I informed them that their confidentiality and anonymity will be given first priority throughout the research. I also informed them that their voluntary participation is highly appreciated as they will be providing data which is capable of informing development interventions impacting upon their livelihoods. I experienced resistance from elderly women due mainly to their research fatigue. They were tired of researchers who come to interview them without any tangible benefits. For instance, one elderly woman, who refused to be interviewed provided the following comments, which not only point to negative impact that development policies may have on people's livelihoods, but also to my obligation as a qualitative researcher to be reflexive:

Please leave me alone, I am struggling to raise money to pay my children's school fees you researchers have introduced. I want them to be educated and become researchers and earn more money just like you. Go away and stop disturbing me.

### **The Complexity of Informed Consent**

Some of the research participants demanded that I should come back and show them how I have actually used their life stories in writing my thesis. This made me to ask myself questions regarding ownership of data I was collecting and how to analyse and interpret it. In searching for answers, I came across Chilisa [16 p678] who observes that "research ethics protocols fail to protect the researched from methodological flaws because ethics is narrowly defined, emphasizing protection of the individual while ignoring researched ownership of knowledge, and respect for communities". To justify that informed consent was given, it is now emphasized that the researcher give the consenting party with a hardcopy of 'consent form' for him/her to sign. The forms should also remind respondents that they have the right to withdraw consent at any point in the study [17]. When applying for ethical approval I was required to supply a copy of informed consent form which I will use during fieldwork. I entered the field equipped with two versions of the approved informed consent form, one in English and the other one in Setswana, the national language in Botswana. The situation I found in Botswana proved that those forms deter rather than facilitate 'informed consent'.

Although I explained that participation in the study is purely voluntary and signing of the consent form is optional, people could not trust the legitimacy of my study. Contrary to the requirement that signing a consent form justifies that confidentiality of the participants will be protected, I realized that in Botswana, people regard signing of such forms to be an unnecessary commitment and more especially a victimizing one. The cultural context of informed consent in Botswana is discussed in

detail by Shaibu [18] from the perspective of family care-giving to the elderly. Shaibu indicates that on the justification that oral communication is still used extensively in Botswana, she requested for and was granted a waiver for a signed consent. The negative impact of the consent forms in gaining access forced me to stop issuing or even mentioning them to potential participants<sup>1</sup>. From my fieldwork experience, informed consent forms need not be a rigid official requirement as they proved that they cannot be applied in all research contexts.

### **Fieldwork Dilemmas**

Aguinaldo [13 p133] suggests that "qualitative researchers should not be constrained within a methodological straightjacket and must be allowed to utilize whatever methods necessary to explore the social phenomenon under consideration". Linked to the context specificity of informed consent is that some young women who initially consented to give an oral narration of their life stories later changed. Instead, they preferred to provide written accounts of their life stories, an innovative data collection method which I also considered to be less intrusive. I handed out exercise books with pens, accompanied by a set of flexible guiding questions (the same ones that guided in-depth life history interviews) and a letter of introduction to 20 young women. With the exception of only 1 of these young women, the other 19 were engaged in street vending.

However, a few days after giving young women the books some of them indicated that they were failing to write, something which is understandable considering their low levels of formal education and they answered standardized open-ended questionnaires. I managed to get back only 8 books with written life stories covering between 1 and 5 pages. Although brief in detail, most of these written life stories were emotionally touching. They revealed the vulnerable circumstances these young women are facing. The following extract from a written life story by one unfortunate young woman (I was reliably informed she died together with her sister from food poisoning) reveals a traumatic life experience:

He wanted a child but I [failed] to have the baby. This man married someone else whilst I was staying with him people of God! (She was expressing shock). I want to encourage the youth, teenagers, and women in Botswana that nowadays there are no men. You do not have to look at someone before he marries you because

<sup>1</sup>Even though I noticed the problem of the consent forms prior to engaging my two research assistants, I gave them several copies to issue to consenting participants for signing without telling them my experience. Interestingly, in our first feedback meeting, they both informed me that the forms seem to frighten potential participants. The forms required consenting participants to reveal their true identity by writing their names and contact addresses. This was basically contradictory to what we were telling them that we are not interested in knowing their names but their willingness to participate in the study!



**Figure 3.** Single-use cameras given to research participants.  
**Source:** Author's fieldwork in Gaborone City, Botswana.

you might have the same problem like me. Youth (young women) stand for yourself until you are married. Since I separated with that man I now see myself going somewhere in life. I received Jesus as my saviour.

Williams [19 p160] states that "[the fact] that research is being conducted at all can focus people's minds on things that might not have occurred to them". Conducting research involving in-depth life history interviews is a complex and delicate process which requires the researcher to be very flexible and vigilant. I experienced the emotional dimension of conducting face-to-face in-depth life history interviews. My study unintentionally made two young women to cry in the process of narrating their life stories. The first young woman to cry caught me off guard and I panicked. I was confused with whether to stop or allow her continue with the narration. After the interview I thanked her and left being a bitter person to myself. I had to be accountable for the injury my research has caused and after two days I went back and fortunately she was as cheerful as before.

I was able to deal with the second incident more successfully. Upon noticing that the young woman's eyes are soaked with tears I had to wait for her to reclaim her composure and then asked for forgiveness indicating that it is not the intention of my research to make people cry but acknowledging that research affects people differently. It was not my intention to visit her again but she insisted that I should come back to complete the

interview. Being an initiator of this social interaction, I had no choice and we arranged to meet. She wept again but still insisted that I should come back as she is willing to share her life story. Faced with such an ethical dilemma I proposed that instead of continuing with the interview, I should send a professional person to talk to her, an idea to which she agreed and I arranged for a professional counselling session for her.

### Other Methods of Data Collection

Building upon the previous discussion of conducting in-depth life history interviews, this section briefly reflects on my experiences of using other methods in data collection.

### Photographs

The use of photographs (photo elicitation interviews) in social research is gaining recognition [20-23]. Harper [22 p757] argues that "use of photographs stimulates memories and result in discussions that go beyond what happened when and how to themes such as this was what this had meant to me or us". I entered the field with 30 single-use cameras (see Figure 3) for the participants to use in taking photographs for in-depth interviews. I managed to distribute 19 cameras out of which only 7 were returned for me to process the film and photos from only 3 were actually used in follow-up interviews.

Although acknowledging potential benefits of taking



photographs, there are however, two interrelated ethical issues that emerged in my attempt to apply this method. Not only is the method costly but the use of photographs emerged to be demanding. Most of the participants were not willing to take photos and they rejected the cameras. Second, most potential participants associated taking of photographs with the mass media. They did not only refuse to take photos but they prevented me from doing so near their enterprises as they suspected that I was a journalist. Having weighed the pros and cons of this method, I decided to put it aside as it was not as user-friendly as I initially thought.

### Standardized Open-ended Questionnaires

Although not initially planned, the use of standardized open-ended questionnaires was a response to three unanticipated fieldwork challenges, namely, heavy rains, increasing financial constraints, and eviction of street vendors by Gaborone City Council<sup>2</sup>. As the words 'standardized' and 'open-ended' themselves imply, these questionnaires comprised a set of questions with no pre-determined choice of alternative answers but the same set of questions were administered to each research participant. Figure 1 illustrates that three types of these questionnaires were developed for youth, adults, and official organizations.

I piloted the questionnaires for youth and adults with the help of my two research assistants. The pilot study revealed that youth preferred a self-administered questionnaire and the final version of the questionnaire was translated and printed in English and Setswana. I agreed with all the participants that they will return the questionnaires within one week, but this was not always possible, and it took up to a month to receive some of them. Although there was no probing in these self-administered questionnaires, they provided valuable data because the participants took time to answer them freely in their own words. However, answers given by some of the participants who were operating next to each other were similar in wording and thus suggesting that such answers were co-constructed. The questionnaire for adults contained the same questions as those for youth but phrased to get perceptions of adults on the livelihoods situation of youth. I administered this questionnaire probing the participants to clarify points they were raising.

The third type of standardized open-ended questionnaire was distributed to five government

agencies and non-governmental organizations working on issues related to youth and women empowerment. This self-administered questionnaire sought to collect data on how different organizations interpret and apply key concepts such as empowerment, youth, gender and development; their policies and implementation mechanisms, relationships with other organizations, and their future plans. I received four partially completed questionnaires and I was successful in holding follow-up 'in-depth' interviews for probing purposes with officers from only two organizations. In addition, it took well over two months to get feedback from all the five organizations. This was due both to bureaucratic procedures of gaining access as well as continuous postponement of appointments and a delay in completing the questionnaire by the responding officers. In order to understand popular narratives informing official development interventions geared towards the empowerment of youth and women I largely consulted documented evidence. The documents consulted include government policy papers, annual reports, reports from different committees and commissions, statistical series, newsletters, brochures, and articles from local newspapers.

### Direct Observations

Social scientists are observers both of human activities and of the physical settings in which such activities take place [24]. Glesne and Peshkin [9 p40] indicate that "participant observation ranges across a continuum from observation to mostly participation"<sup>3</sup>. Qualitative observers are not bound by predetermined categories of measurements or responses but are free to search for concepts or categories that appear meaningful to subjects [25]. I conducted observations from the very first day and throughout my fieldwork. There were no predetermined categories of issues and thus all the observations were undertaken in an open-ended and unstructured way [26]. In other words, the observations just evolved spontaneously without prior planning of any kind. The observations were done concurrently with other methods of data collection which required interaction with the participants, and as such, I was an 'observer as participant' [9].

I overtly watched what people were doing and listened to what they were saying, rather than simply asking them about their views and feelings [27]. The observations went beyond things which were visible to my eye to encompass unobtrusive observation of naturally

<sup>2</sup>Whilst I was still busy with negotiations to gain entrée, Gaborone City Council evicted street vendors within the City Centre and confiscated their tables and chairs on the grounds that they litter the City. Surprisingly, the City Council later ordered the concerned poor victims to pay a specified amount of money in order to get their properties back. Unfortunately, not only did this eviction negatively impacted on poor people's livelihoods but it was also a deterrent to the progress of my research. First, I lost all potential research participants who were forthcoming in giving informed consent. Second, most of the street vendors began to regard me as a villain who rob them of their information and pass it over to Gaborone City Council.

<sup>3</sup> In the 'observer' end of the continuum, the researcher's role is to keep with the traditional scientific paradigm, wherein the researcher has little to no interaction with those being studied. The next point on the continuum is 'observer as participant' where the researcher remains primarily an observer but has interaction with study participants. The 'participant as observer' is when the researcher functions as a member of the everyday world of the researched. Finally, the 'full participant' is simultaneously a functioning member of the community undergoing investigation and an investigator. Also see Adler and Adler (1998: 84-5) for various roles of researchers when conducting observations.

occurring conversations between street vendors and their visitors (customers, friends or family members). This ability to make observations beyond what was visible to the eye improved opportunities for understanding the complex contextual background of the research participants' livelihoods [27]. The observations revealed important issues such as social networks, decision-making processes, and different perspectives of young women within group dynamics from a broader perspective than were captured by other methods. Even though all the observations were unstructured in nature, data gained from most of them were recorded as field notes indicating the date the observation occurred.

### Data Analysis

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that different methods I applied in my study generated large amounts of data and thus creating challenges of data management. I developed a multi-filing system to store data collected through different methods and from different individuals separately to avoid mixing them up prior to detailed data analysis. The inductive and iterative nature of qualitative research indicates that data collection and analysis are not two separate phases of the research but they go hand in hand [28,29]. The study was not an exception. I divided data analysis into two interconnected phases. The first phase I termed 'foundational analysis' was undertaken concurrently with data collection and it involved verbatim transcription of some of the audiotapes. I sent the transcripts to respective participants for member checking to corroborate their information. The analysis involved searching for key themes emerging from different sources of data.

The second phase I termed 'detailed data analysis' was undertaken at end of data collection to address the research questions of the study. The study involved rich life-history data and this phase was based on thematic narrative approach [29-32]. Narrative analysis takes as its object of analysis the story itself [33]. Apart from using this approach in analysing data from the key research participants, it was also applied in analysing data from organizations. The purpose here was to identify popular narratives which appear to shape policies and practices on youth and women empowerment. Hence, narratives and counter-narratives approach was adopted in reporting the findings.

### The Challenges of Transcription and Translation

It is worthwhile to note that I experienced a number of challenges in analysing data. I initially planned to transcribe each audiotape during fieldwork immediately after the interviews whilst my memory was still fresh with what transpired during the interview. This was not possible due to bad weather conditions, regular electricity

power failures, and other uncontrollable factors. Importantly, transcribing each audiotape took longer time than anticipated due to challenges of translation. The interviews were conducted either in Setswana, the national language in Botswana or *Ikhalanga*, my mother tongue. I am very fluent in speaking these two local languages but transcription was done in English because I am more conversant in writing in this language than the other two. Although this insight appears to be unusual limitation for an 'insider', it is not unique to me as an individual. I can safely argue that this is likely to be common amongst citizens of Botswana. Being a former protectorate of Britain, Botswana's education system is heavily structured around the British system where English is the recommended medium of instruction [34]. At independence, Botswana adopted a model of social development for its culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse population [35]. English became the constitutional language and Setswana was understood to be the national language but not so stated in the Constitution, a system considered to be oppressive on cultures and languages of other ethnic groups [35].

Listening to audiotapes recorded in local languages and translating them to English was challenging and time consuming on my side as a first time researcher. Most of the research participants used complex local expressions and metaphors. Easton and Greenberg [36 p.706] state that "being unfamiliar with slang terms or words specific to a culture can lead to the misinterpretation or mistranscription of them". As an 'insider' I understood most of those expressions but I had difficulties in thinking of English expressions which mean exactly what the narrator said. Punch [26 p224] states that "people use metaphors constantly as a way of making sense of experiences, and of expressing and conveying its meaning [and] qualitative analysts will often do the same thing in making sense of data". Chilisa [16 p.678] suggests that "a research ethics protocol should insist that the research is carried out in the local language and that findings are written in the local language, especially where the researched are not familiar with English". Hence, in presenting the findings where necessary I used the local language of Setswana and an English translation to minimize distortion of the rich data.

### Conclusion

This paper reflected on the different aspect of the methodological approach applied in my doctoral thesis to provide insights to new researchers who are interested in conducting a qualitative study. Although the study did not give priority to any of the methods used, the discussion revealed that negotiating access and conducting in-depth life history interviews was too challenging. It is evident that there are complex methodological and ethical dilemmas involved in using this method particularly with women in one's own socio-cultural context. Above all,

in-depth life history interviews have broadened my intellectual capacity to appreciate the value of 'our' socio-cultural aspects, which as an 'insider' I initially took for granted. Despite complex methodological and ethical challenges encountered, the findings from the study have important implications for development interventions in Botswana. The study contributed significantly to the emerging body of literature that seeks to broaden knowledge on the subjects of youth, gender and development in the country [37-39]. It revealed knowledge gaps in many areas including my current research project, which seeks to explore the place of men and masculinities in gender approach to development.

However, my doctoral study just like other research works had methodological and resource limitations that need to be explicitly acknowledged. In methodological terms, the study was conducted with a group of participants (street vendors) operating within a contested socio-political context, which has introduced some limitations to its findings. In addition, considering that the study builds upon my previous research on street vending, despite their differences in academic orientations, the fact still remains that my 'subjectivity' both as an 'insider' (culturally and otherwise) and the researcher as the main instrument of data collection and analysis [40] might have limited the study in some ways. In terms of resources, I had no other potential sources of funding apart from relying entirely on my generous and prestigious Commonwealth Scholarship. It is unquestionable therefore that working on a doctoral study under such a tense situation I might have introduced some limitations to data collection and analysis and discussion of the findings.

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